

OHIO: Housing Campaign Wins Dedicated Funds for Ohio's Housing Trust Fund

Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHHIO)

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- COHHIO and its allies set out in 2001 to win a dedicated funding stream for Ohio's housing trust fund. The two-year, \$125,000 campaign used grassroots organizing and free media to win an annual \$50 million funding stream in 2003.
- By demonstrating how effectively affordable housing subsidies can be leveraged, and how many people can benefit from such resources, COHHIO was able to win influential allies – such as banks and business groups.
- Grassroots organizing efforts to garner endorsements from more than 900 organizations and nonprofits helped demonstrate the breadth of the campaign's support.

Ohio's Housing Trust Fund (OHTF) can now count on at least \$50 million in dedicated funding annually, thanks to efforts led by the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHHIO). By building a broad coalition and demonstrating how well the OHTF had served the state since its inception, the group was able to convince the legislature to allocate the funds to support affordable housing.

Though it was established in 1992, the OHTF was subject to budget appropriations every two years, and funding levels had ranged from \$5 million to \$20 million. As in many states, budget shortfalls have made Ohio's fiscal situation difficult, and there were no guarantees that the OHTF would receive any appropriations at all. COHHIO's campaign was to persuade the legislature to create a dedicated

source of funds for the Fund.

COHHIO is a coalition of organizations and individuals committed to ending homelessness and to promoting decent, safe, fair, affordable housing for all, with a focus on assisting low-income people and those with special needs. The group was formed in 1994 with the merger of two organizations dedicated to affordable housing. A nonprofit organization with 15 full-time staff members and many volunteers, COHHIO conducts education and advocacy to improve housing and address homelessness throughout Ohio.

In 2001 COHHIO began joining forces with about 900 state and local businesses and with groups whose agendas included housing and homelessness to lobby for dedicated funding for the housing trust fund. But the idea faced strong opposition from some county officials and smaller lenders, such as mortgage bankers.

With a \$125,000 campaign budget, the coalition hired a media consultant and grassroots organizing coordinator. The media consultant, Jenny Camper, had experience working with political clients through a public relations firm she had previously worked for, and so was able to help craft appropriate messages.

To quantify the benefits of the OHTF, the campaign compiled statistics demonstrating the value of the investments it had made. "We wanted to show how much private investment had been leveraged, who and how many people benefited as a result of housing assistance, and we needed to show that the benefits extended to both urban and rural communities," said Faith. A Web site and brochure were produced, providing background about the successes of the OHTF, and legislators were given tours to give them a firsthand look at how successful the OHTF was at helping to provide solid affordable housing opportunities.

Armed with this information and talking points, the coalition held a press briefing at the statehouse to offer background on the issue and explain the need. "We didn't initially tell

reporters the solution we had in mind,” said Faith. “We sort of teased them to try to get their interest to cover the bill as it moved forward in the legislature.”

Campaign leaders and local endorsers met with newspaper editorial boards to enlist support, and they prepared op-ed articles on behalf of local business people, which ran in newspapers in key districts. The coalition also pitched stories to illustrate the human benefits of the affordable housing projects that had already been funded. No paid media was used during the campaign.

Faith says it was a challenge to hold the attention of the statehouse media. “We weren’t able to keep them focused on the legislation all of the way through the process,” he said. The campaign did win over some large banks and business groups, like the Ohio Association of Realtors, who along with hundreds of local officials, service organizations, labor groups and civic leaders, endorsed the legislation.

The campaign also targeted business leaders, local political leaders, and developers in key legislative districts, seeking their endorsement for the legislation and giving them endorsement forms. Local organizations and nonprofits were also lobbied. The effort netted more than 900 endorsements.

In June 2003, the legislation passed, increasing county recording fees. The first \$50 million a year in this new revenue provides a permanent, dedicated source of money for the Ohio Housing Trust Fund. The law took effect on August 1, one year after COHHIO and its partners launched their campaign.

Faith added that 15 years ago the trust fund wouldn’t even have been permitted under the state’s constitution – which had an amendment prohibiting the state from lending or borrowing money for housing production – but that an advocacy campaign in 1989 succeeded in winning a ballot measure declaring housing a “proper and good public purpose.” At that time, he said, nonprofits and the state had no record of producing affordable housing, so the campaign couldn’t be based on a message of building upon successes. Instead, advocates focused on demonstrating the wide range of people who needed housing assistance, such as seniors and families with children, and stayed away from negative buzzwords like ‘affordable’ or ‘low-income.’

That campaign had a very limited budget, said Faith, but did manage to produce a low-cost television spot that ran in a few markets around the state. With limited opposition – the state’s major newspapers endorsed the initiative, as did both candidates for governor and the outgoing governor – advocates were able to persuade voters to see that the amendment was “good public policy,” said Faith. Literature mailings and presentations to groups around the state helped get the message out.

Thanks to the success of that campaign, Ohio has issued close to a billion dollars in multifamily housing bonds since then, and was able to pass the housing trust fund as well.

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